



## Looking Back to Move Forward: A Book Review of *Roll Red Roll* to Inform Sport Social Work

**Emily Nothnagle**

*The Ohio State University, College of Social Work*

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*This book review provides an overview of *Roll Red Roll: Rape, Power, and Football in the American Heartland* (Roll Red Roll) by Nancy Schwartzman and Nora Zelevansky (2022). The review describes how this book can inform sport social work education, research, policy, and practice. *Roll Red Roll* describes the rape culture that existed in Steubenville, Ohio, and on the Steubenville High School football team that contributed to the assault of Jane Doe in 2012 by high school football players. Through power theory and feminist perspectives, sport social workers can examine the mechanisms that contribute to rape culture in sport contexts. With a greater understanding of the construction of rape culture, sport social work practice and interventions can aim to dismantle toxic masculinity and support survivors of sexual violence.*

*Keywords: Sexual Assault, Adolescent, Sport, Athlete*

Social workers commit themselves to social justice and human rights, aiming to serve socially vulnerable populations and intervene to address social issues. The book *Roll Red Roll: Rape, Power, and Football in the American Heartland* illuminates how one community turned a blind eye to sexual assault in the context of sport. This book is especially relevant to the social work profession as it not only describes the predictors and hidden factors contributing to rape cultures, but also provides a context for how organizations, administrators, coaches, athletes, and sport social workers can work together to advocate for the liberation of sexual assault survivors and act as allies in the rape culture movement. This book review will provide an overview of *Roll Red Roll: Rape, Power, and Football in the American Heartland* and describe how this book can inform sport social work education, research, policy, and practice.

### Overview of the Book

In 2022, filmmaker Nancy Schwartzman adapted her 2018 documentary *Roll Red Roll* into the book *Roll Red Roll: Rape, Power, and Football in the American Heartland* with author and journalist Nora Zelevansky. The book discusses the nationally recognized 2012 sexual assault case that occurred in Steubenville, Ohio, involving several members of the Steubenville

High School football team, known as “Big Red.” The authors describe the incident and the town’s response from a historical perspective before dissecting how Steubenville’s social climate allowed a hidden rape culture to fester.

The book begins by describing how a 2012 high school party spiraled out of control in Steubenville as teenagers, including several members of Big Red, drank alcohol and sexually assaulted a sixteen-year-old Jane Doe from another school while documenting the night on their cellphones. Jane Doe was too intoxicated to consent, and perpetrators assaulted her in the backseat of a car and the basement of a house as teammates and friends watched, took and shared pictures and videos, and joked about her degradation. Evidence of the assault circulated through text messages and posts on social media. Jane Doe’s parents gathered the digital evidence on a hard drive and submitted it to the police. The investigation resulted in the arrest, and eventual rape conviction in juvenile court, of Big Red players Trent Mays and Ma’lik Richmond.

Notably, the authors chose to engage the reader in perspective-taking about the social context of this community rather than focusing explicitly on Jane Doe’s experiences. This is relevant to social work’s commitment to contextualizing social issues within the frameworks of systems theory and the person-in-environment perspective. *Roll Red Roll* explores the social mechanisms that enabled the so-called Steubenville “Rape Crew” to sexually assault Jane Doe without fear of repercussions by examining court records, online sources, and interviews from the 2018 *Roll Red Roll* documentary. Through this lens, the authors explore rape culture as it exists in the American Heartland and its implications for the United States as a whole.

Using Steubenville as a sort of case study, the authors describe how the community and climate of the town’s football program created a rape culture and led to this event. Steubenville is a small, economically depressed town that still holds true to social norms comparable to when townsmen held steady jobs at the steel plants. As steel production became outsourced, many people lost their jobs, and the town still feels the economic reverberations of this workforce disruption. While many felt their identities change alongside job loss, Big Red Football remained constant. The authors detail how Steubenville residents pack into the stands of the 10,000-seat stadium to cheer on the high school football team on Friday nights. Big Red players earned a celebrity-like status in Steubenville, regularly playing in front of thousands of people. Consistent with systems and person-in-environment theories, the behaviors of Big Red players relate to the surrounding social environment described in *Roll Red Roll*. For example, idolizing young football players can provide the impression that these boys should be afforded certain privileges, including a lack of accountability for prior incidents, creating a sense of invincibility. For social workers reading this book, the intersection of power and status and lack of accountability within the community for males, especially football players, begins to contextualize the environment in which Jane Doe’s rape occurred.

Moreover, the authors document additional individual, relational, and community factors that precipitated this event that coincide with power theory and feminist perspectives. Adolescent boys on the Big Red Football team are socialized and taught to prioritize the team and its members above anything or anyone else. This creates significant pressure to protect the in-group football team, leading to groupthink. Big Red players did not speak out against wrongdoing like the assault of Jane Doe in 2012. Instead, many encouraged the perpetrators and later protected them with lies, protecting the in-group football team rather than the outsider Jane Doe.

The “us versus them” mentality that exists on the field is exacerbated by language centered on destroying the opponent or “enemy” and the expectation to be the dominant male, promoting hegemonic masculinity (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Football is an overwhelmingly male sport with little opportunity for female participation. The exclusion of females in football inherently devalues them, suggesting that females are unworthy of inclusion unless they are hyper-sexualized as cheerleaders dressed in revealing uniforms (Tom, 2010). The devaluation and hyper-sexualization of females combined with hegemonic masculine rhetoric contributes to the creation of rape culture as football players perceive entitlement to sexually conquer women and girls (Tom, 2010; Tredinnick et al., 2023).

Importantly, teenagers were not the only people who tried to protect the perpetrators. Several adults including parents, coaches, and school administrators deleted digital evidence and refused to cooperate with police to protect their football players. Religion also impacted how Steubenville residents perceived the situation as the Catholic ideal of purity tainted opinions of Jane Doe. Many adults and adolescents alike engaged in debates arguing that Jane Doe’s supposed promiscuity led to her assault; others claimed she was making false accusations.

The final chapters of *Roll Red Roll* are a call to action to dismantle rape culture through educational programs and access to support for survivors. The authors provide several resources for survivors of sexual or gender-based violence and highlight several violence prevention programs.

Schwartzman and Zelevansky offer a convincing explanation of how rape culture is created through football’s promotion of groupthink and toxic masculinity. However, this book does not explore the LGBTQIA+ community in the discussions of gender-based violence. While it is briefly mentioned in the latter chapters, there is little discussion about the disproportionate number of LGBTQIA+ people who experience sexual assault (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019). The inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the discussion of sexual violence would strengthen the quality of *Roll Red Roll* as it would provide a more comprehensive overview of rape culture and its survivors. Additionally, the authors did not discuss whether the school had policies in place to discourage these behaviors and penalize athletes for smaller transgressions. Also missing from the book was whether the school engaged students in bystander interventions or if adults working with adolescents received training to respond to sexual assault crises.

### **Takeaways for Sport Social Workers**

Schwartzman and Zelevansky's *Roll Red Roll* offers several key takeaways for sport social work education, research, policy, and practice.

### **Sport Social Work Education**

*Roll Red Roll* has several takeaways for sport social work education. Sport social workers could host bystander-to-upstander intervention trainings in athletic departments and build more effective reporting structures by increasing athlete and coach awareness of who to contact when issues arise, as suggested by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2023). More comprehensive sexual assault prevention programs are needed, requiring sport social workers to have a sophisticated understanding of rape culture in athletic contexts. Also, sport social workers

must advocate for mandatory prevention trainings and increased accountability structures in athletic departments. Sport social workers may also work with male athletes to challenge and deconstruct toxic masculinity in athletics as well as work with survivors to address trauma and mental health concerns associated with sexual assault.

### **Sport Social Work Research**

This book has implications for sport social work research as well. Sport social work researchers should study the existing structures within athletic departments that contribute to rape culture. A more thorough understanding how rape culture is created would allow sport social workers to design evidence-based intervention and prevention programs that challenge toxic masculinity and notions of acceptability regarding sexual violence in sport contexts. In addition to creating evidence-based intervention and prevention programs, sport social work researchers could also evaluate existing programs. Such evaluations could include studying the effectiveness of sexual violence intervention and prevention programs offered specifically in athletic contexts. Additionally, researchers could examine the implementation fidelity and transferability of sexual violence intervention and prevention programs designed for other, non-sport settings to be used in athletic contexts.

### **Sport Social Work Policy**

Additionally, there are takeaways for sport social work policy, including the need to advocate for laws and policies that protect survivors of sexual violence. The Alliance of Social Workers in Sport's (ASWIS) Policy Platform states that "athletes and those around them deserve to be able to compete and live without fear for their personal safety" (ASWIS, n.d.). This includes improving awareness of, response to, and prevention of sexual violence. Laws regarding sexual violence vary by state in the United States, and sport social workers can advocate for reform within the legal system to advocate for survivors' rights. Sport social workers should also establish clear policies and guidelines for athletic departments when instances of sexual violence occur. Policies outlined by the NCAA in the *Sexual Violence Prevention: An Athletics Tool Kit for a Healthy and Safe Culture* could be used as a guide when considering high school sport programs (NCAA, 2023).

### **Sport Social Work Practice**

Another takeaway for sport social workers is the need to support coaches regarding sexual violence and conduct bystander-to-upstander interventions for student-athletes, especially males. Reflecting upon an interview with the head coach of Big Red, the authors recognize that "as a football coach, and not a social worker, he wasn't trained to support the needs of modern teenagers navigating a sexually charged culture" (Schwartzman & Zelevansky, 2022, p. 197). Instead of just responding to these issues as they arise, sport social workers must do preventative work with coaches and athletes, such as establishing clear expectations for behavior regarding sexual violence as suggested by the NCAA (2023). Coach education rarely emphasizes social-emotional well-being or positive youth development (Atkinson et al., 2022), and sport social

workers can establish education programs to prepare coaches to report sexual violence and cultivate a culture of care with their athletes that respects women and condemns rape. This book allows sport social workers to consider prevention and intervention tactics aligning with social work values, ethics, and commitments to vulnerable populations and social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2021).

After reading *Roll Red Roll: Rape, Power, and Football in the American Heartland*, I would recommend this book to high school coaches, school social workers, parents of athletes, and high school athletes. Throughout the course of the book, the authors engage in an accessible, conversational tone characteristic of journalists. This text is easily digested and would be impactful for those who work with adolescent athletes and athletes themselves as they are invited to reflect on their own experiences in sport and how they can create a safer environment for all.

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